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ARTICLE REPRODUCED
PAGE 26

Senators Warned About Disclosures

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Senate leaders, prompted by a controversy involving allegations by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) about the CIA's role in the recent Salvadoran elections, called on senators yesterday to "exercise especial care before discussing intelligence matters."

The warning came in a letter to all senators from Majority Leader Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.) and Minority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) in response to a request from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, a source said.

The source added that the intelligence committee found no evidence of wrongdoing on Helms' part but wanted the two leaders to remind the Senate of the ground rules for disclosing classified information.

In a handwritten letter to the two leaders that was released earlier this week, the committee's senior members, Sens. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), had accused Helms of disclosing classified information that had been provided to the committee.

Helms' Allegations Over CIA Prompt Letter From Leaders

Helms, who contended in a Senate floor speech that the CIA had "bought the election" for Jose Napoleon Duarte, the president-elect of El Salvador, has denied that he disclosed committee information.

He said he relied on other sources of information, including a broadcast by a San Salvador radio station, and called on Goldwater and Moynihan to substantiate their charges.

A Senate Republican source said Helms has also asked the Senate Select Committee on Ethics to look into the controversy, including how information in the Goldwater-Moynihan letter, which also was classified, was leaked to the press.

In their "Dear Senator" letter yesterday, Baker and Byrd did not mention the incident specifically or Helms by name. They warned members to use caution in discussing information about intelligence activities in case it is classified, regardless of whether it comes from the intelligence committee.

"If any senator receives information about alleged intelligence activities from sources other than the Intelligence Committee, he or she should bear in mind that such information may well be classified and the subject of the committee's oversight," said the two leaders.

Accordingly, any senator wishing to speak about intelligence activities should consult the committee first, said Baker and Byrd, adding:

"The appearance that details of proceedings before the Intelligence Committee or sensitive information before the Intelligence Committee are being discussed in open session on the floor, or in any other manner not authorized, ... cannot help but undermine the mutual confidence that must exist between the committee and the intelligence community if congressional oversight of intelligence activities is to be effective," they said.

The two leaders enclosed copies of the rules governing senatorial access to classified information and noted that it "prohibits a senator from disclosing such information, except in a closed session of the Senate."